

# YELLOW PERCH FISHING

## *Feast or Famine*



CRAIG BIRHLE

By Greg Power

Buckets of yellow perch, many of them 12 inches and longer. What's perhaps just a dream today was reality for ice anglers fishing many North Dakota waters a few years back.

Ice anglers across the state are now scratching their heads and asking how such fantastic perch fishing can seemingly develop overnight, yet fade away even faster. It's a fair question that warrants an explanation.

First, these perch fisheries did not develop overnight, as it takes about five years or longer to grow a 12-inch perch. Following the drought of 1988-92, unprecedented wet conditions dominated much of North Dakota until the late 1990s. Rain and snowmelt filled sloughs and meadows, creating new perch fisheries. Most of these waters were initially predator-free, so young perch survival was good. Fish growth was also good, as aquatic invertebrate numbers exploded, with little else to feed on them but yellow perch.

The result: remarkable perch fishing, in central and eastern North Dakota beginning in the late 1990s and continuing through 2004.

These new high-quality yellow perch fisheries, coupled with a networked society spreading the word with cell phones and the Internet, doubled public interest in perch fishing from 1970 to 2000.

During the winter of 1999-2000, four of the top eight North Dakota waters that received the most ice-fishing effort from anglers were "new" perch lakes. Not only were these waters popular with resident anglers, but many nonresidents, especially from Wisconsin, came to catch big perch – and lots of them. As recent as November 2002, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* provided a list of nearly 70 new lakes that had the potential for a good perch bite.

*Yellow perch provide hours of entertainment to those willing to brave winter's chill atop a five-gallon bucket.*

If we produced a similar list today, many of those lakes would not be on it. The question remains: Why has perch fishing declined so rapidly? If we're going to point fingers, northern pike, double-crested cormorants, anglers and, most importantly, a lack of water get the blame.

While most new perch lakes developed in the late 1990s without fish-eating predators, what was bound to happen did happen and northern pike found their way into many of those waters. With plenty to eat and quality spawning habitat available, pike thrived.

Good examples of great perch lakes that eventually became compromised, at least in part, by northern pike include Dry Lake, McIntosh County; Lake Laretta, Nelson County; Sibley Lake, Griggs County; and West Napoleon, Logan County.

Keeping a new perch lake pike-free will likely add a couple years of good perch fishing. Even so, the fish food becomes limited in time and the exceptional perch growth will slow, with or without pike. Also, in smaller lakes and reservoirs – less than 100 acres – some predator species are often needed to balance the fishery, as perch or other panfish will often overpopulate and not grow without some thinning.

Another perch predator uses wings instead of fins. Along with expanding perch populations, the number of double-crested cormorants in North Dakota expanded significantly in the late 1990s. Acres and acres of inundated, dead trees overlooking lakes became perfect nesting and loafing habitat for cormorants. Although cormorants will eat a variety of live fish species, perch, if abundant, are often targeted. On average, a cormorant will conservatively eat 125 pounds of fish a summer. Some new perch lakes attracted 50 to 100-plus cormorants. Do the math and it tells you that these fish-eating birds can reduce a perch fishery. Cormorants likely thinned fish populations on a number of smaller perch lakes, and also had some influence on larger popular fisheries such as Logan Wildlife Management Area in Logan County.

Of course, another effective yellow perch predator sits on a bucket atop the ice. Angler harvest can be significant, especially if it goes unchecked. Alkaline Lake in Kidder County is a good example. In February and March of 2000, before a daily perch limit was put in place, thousands of ice anglers caught tens, if not hundreds of thousands of perch. Not only did the harvested perch fill buckets,



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but in some cases people pulled home ice sleds full of perch.

Alkaline Lake never fully recovered from the onslaught, even though in April 2000 the first daily limit of 50 perch was imposed statewide. The current daily limit is 35.

Another example of high perch harvest occurred at Flood Lake in LaMoure County in January 1999. Hundreds of vehicles on the ice were commonplace, with most anglers taking home buckets of perch. No lake, Flood Lake included, can withstand this type of pressure and harvest. Not long thereafter, fishing at Flood Lake was mediocre, at best.

Lastly, unlike pike and cormorants, anglers often select only larger perch, negatively affecting the long-term size structure of the perch population.

Since many of these new perch lakes were likely temporary, some argued that there really wasn't a need for limits since the water would be gone in a few years. Others countered that these lakes could be around for a long time, and conservative perch limits would allow for an extended harvest among more anglers.

Recent research in similar lakes in the upper Midwest indicate that daily limits would need to be reduced to fewer than 10 perch per angler to protect both the number and favorable size structure of the fishery. Although most of North Dakota's better perch lakes likely experienced some overfishing, a few continue to be extremely resilient to harvest. For instance, perch fishing at South Hobart Lake in Barnes County may not be at its peak, but it remains good despite relatively high fishing pressure most winters.

The newly inundated lake basins of the mid- to late '90s were perfect for fish production. They provided flooded vegetation for perch reproduction, a phenomenal aquatic

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*Inset: Northern pike that found their way into some of North Dakota's perch waters thrived because there was plenty to eat and places to spawn.*

invertebrate smorgasbord for fish to eat, large new homes (many waters were 800 acres and larger), and most importantly, depth.

Lake size and depth are probably the most important factors influencing quality perch populations. Some of the better perch fishing occurred in large new lakes that had maximum depths of 14 feet or deeper. Beyond the take by cormorants and pike at Logan WMA and West Napoleon lakes, low lake levels ultimately became the main reason for the demise of these once thriving perch fisheries. Logan WMA suffered a total winterkill in 2003, and after a couple dry years, West Napoleon became so low in summer 2005, you could nearly wade across the lake. Trophy perch were also noted in Wentz WPA in Logan County for a couple winters in the early 2000s, but by 2004 the lake's elevation dropped 10 feet or more and reverted back to what it once was – a duck slough.

Though many of these phenomenal perch fisheries have come and gone, other perch fishing opportunities remain scattered about the state. And a few new jewels will continue to develop in the next few years. However, to find a new perch lake that hasn't been

affected – collectively or individually – by pike, cormorants, anglers or lower lake levels, is unlikely.

The reality of living on the Northern Plains is the dramatic changes in weather, both short- and long-term. North Dakota fauna evolved to withstand these weather extremes, boom or bust. In 1999, Craig Bihrie, North Dakota Game and Fish Department communications supervisor, wrote the following in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* about water conditions and the state's perch fisheries: "History tells us that even seemingly invincible water will evaporate at rate of two feet or more in dry years. Several dry years can take fish-supporting water out of North Dakota's prairie basins. What history doesn't tell us is when that dry cycle will come."

Drier conditions the past few years, especially in south central North Dakota, have once again transformed the prairie and waterscape, but give it time. Granted, maybe a lot of time, but eventually the cycle will turn.

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